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ABSTRACT

While human emotions are often considered instinctive, this paper examines the notion that indifference to events or circumstances which might seem to have a prima facie claim to emotional significance is related to the narrative construction of those events or circumstances in the life of the observer, and is not a result of absolute stimulus value or of inner biological events. Also, indifference is selective in the same person. Caring is invested in some objects and utterly withheld from others; this selective investment of caring is intelligible only from a narrative point of view. Finally, the range and character of indifferent events and objects varies dramatically from person to person in a way that is consistent with a person's constructed identity and the relation of that identity to the world. Since moral judgments about actions are a direct function of selective indifference, it follows that systems of morality are selective and partial as well. The moral quality of objects, and hence their emotional significance, inheres not in the objects but in the way those objects are described by the selective moralist. Enormous individual differences exist in the capacity to maintain a wide range of conscious and moral interest in the world. Examples are cited that are consistent with the proposition that emotional reactivity and the lack of it--indifference--are dependent upon the connections between individuals and their circumstances created by their narrative constructions. Psychology is coming to understand that human life cannot be understood at all without the premise that humans are as much biographical creatures as they are biological ones. Contains nine references. (BF)

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On a Certain Emotional Blindness in Human Beings[1]

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> Neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.
>
> --William James[2]

These lines are taken from the concluding section of James' essay, "On a certain blindness in human beings." The essay is a compilation of cases illustrating the enormous differences from person to person (or from creature to creature) in their interest in and judgement of exactly the same conditions. The dog is amazed that its master could spend hours staring at the pages of a book, and the master does not understand the charming smells of trees and lampposts. The tourist is blind to the North Carolina mountain dweller's pride of place, seeing in his cove clearings unspeakable squalor where the native sees comfort and a sign of victory over nature. One person is frankly bored by and indifferent to natural phenomena, while for Wordsworth:

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[2] James, 1900, p. 264

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To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel
Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass
Lay bedded in some quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

James' arguments about selective blindness can be extended and integrated with a narrative analysis of emotions and the lack of emotions--indifference. I choose in these remarks to focus on indifference, or emotional blindness. My major claim is that indifference to events or circumstances which might seem to have a prima facie claim to emotional significance is related to the narrative construction of those events or circumstances in the life of the observer, and is not a result of absolute stimulus value or of inner biological events. Also, indifference is selective in the same person. Caring is invested in some objects and utterly withheld from others; this selective investment of caring is intelligible only from a narrative point of view. Finally, the range and character of indifferent events and objects varies dramatically from person to person in a way that is consistent with a person's constructed identity and the relation of that identity to the world.

Since moral judgements about actions are a direct function of selective indifference, it follows that systems of morality are selective and partial as well. The moral quality of objects, and hence their emotional significance, inheres not in the

objects but in the way those objects are described by the selective moralist. The same piece of meat can be described as a sizzling sirloin, or the partially-burned, excised muscle of a murdered steer. Similarly, right-to-life advocates are fond of storying the unborn fetus, removing it by graphic rhetoric from the realm of the indifferent to the realm of emotional regard.

Nature is both profoundly indifferent and amoral to life in all its forms. We are moral creatures living in an amoral world. Our capacity to story ourselves and the world about us removes our indifference, in part, but only in small part--for I claim that our normal condition is to be indifferent to life and death, save our own life and death and then secondarily to the lives and deaths of such other creatures, real and imagined, as come to be connected to us or presented to us in our made worlds. We are not indifferent to objects in our own narrative worlds, even though those objects are made up. The tears in the theater at the deaths of the wives of Forrest Gump or of C.S. Lewis are as real as any others. Art pulls us away from the indifference of nature into our fretful humanity, and there we cry, we laugh, we blush. All art is propaganda, as Orwell has said, and the function of propaganda is to make us care passionately about that to which we were formerly indifferent.

We live in circles of meaning, circles created by our own life histories; our formal and informal connections to others begin, endure for awhile, and are often forgotten--then passing

out of the circles of meaning and into the void of indifference. We read of the death of a childhood chum--someone once close but now long out of the circles of our active life--and accord it notice, but little feeling. If you want a person to care about something--say the war in Bosnia, the victimization of women, the pestilence in Rwanda, the doleful consequences of crack addiction, the deadly consequence of easy access to guns--you must bring these events vividly into a person's circle of meaning by words and pictures--dramatically composed and frequently repeated. Consciousness is naturally lazy and retreats easily into indifference; consciousness raising removes indifference, if only for awhile.

Enormous individual differences exist in the capacity to maintain a wide range of conscious and moral interest in the world. Wordsworth roams nature and invests each object with moral life. Thoreau is inspired and alive at Walden Pond, not bored and withdrawn. Whitman exults where other men snore. Listen to Emerson:

> Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. (from James, 1900, p, 257)

Similarly, Carl Jung (1965) talks to his pots and pans and cannot shake his animistic visions. Annie Dillard (1982), in our time, takes seriously the task of teaching a stone to talk--and

she says, after prolonged and assiduous observation, "Nature's silence is its one remark" (p. 69).

At the other extreme, I can describe a case deserving the clinical label, alexithymia--a term applied to patients who have marked difficulty in verbal expression of emotions and a limited capacity for fantasy. Let me call him Alex.

Alex is the 18-year-old son of a divorced couple--the father is a pilot and the mother, a practical nurse. He has one older sister. Alex has a tested IQ of about 120, but was consistently an indifferent student. He has no friends, no interest in sports, no hobbies, no apparent sexual interests or activities. He does not help with household chores. He is passive, not actively rebellious. He doesn't break things nor fix them. When he reached age 16, he began to stay home from school, often sleeping until mid-afternoon. He lives with his mother, who has brain cancer, and his older sister, who is actively rebellious, often sneaks out of the house at night, and has a strong interest in boys. The mother has tried to force Alex to go to school, but he refuses. She has taken him to school, dropped him off at the door, only to have him walk home. She has resorted to locking him out of the house, but he simply stays all day in the garage. She removed the television set and VCR from his room, but since this punishment produced no apparent consequences, she eventually gave in and restored them.

At age 17, Alex was sent off to a military academy. For awhile he seemed to be adapting well to the structure of the

place. However, within six weeks of his arrival he was dismissed for two instances of petty theft and was returned home, where he resumed his residence in his room.

In counseling sessions, Alex is passive, difficult to engage, but adept at defending his pattern of life. When asked what he would like to do with his life in the future, he says he would like to be a pilot, like his father. When it was pointed out that he would need to complete his high school education and enter into a training program to obtain this objective, he responded that he is smart enough to pass the tests when he has to. Indeed, he did complete a GED program, to which he was ferried on a weekly basis by his father. When it is pointed out that his passivity and lack of cooperation creates difficulties for his sick mother (the case in point was his refusal to shovel show to clear the driveway, forcing his cancer-ridden mother to this chore), he simply said that he didn't care. In fact, the response, "I don't care," is Alex's most frequent locution, and proved to be as exasperatingly unanswerable as Melville's "Bartleby, the scrivener," who used the similar phrase, "I would prefer not to."

Alex does not appear to be terribly unhappy as a person--it is the people around him who are made miserable by his indifference and moral inertia. He is, in fact, not utterly indifferent to everything. He has an interest in science fiction, in computer games, in movies, and in airplanes. But even these objects in his circles of meaning seem not to be

essential, for if any of them are removed, or an attempt is made to arrange them in a Skinnerian-contingency fashion so as to move him to be more responsive, he simply ignores the absent object and waits things out. He is capable of spending days on end circulating placidly between bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom, with no need for diversion or special attention. He shows no emotion--neither cries no laughs. His mother reports that as a baby, he cried very little. He does exhibit a facial expression which I interpret as a smirk (but now I am taking license and showing my own emotions.) At this writing, he is still living at home. Despite his mother's repeated threats to throw him out of the house, and several attempts in this direction, he always wanders back home, and she, out of pity, takes him in again.

While Alex is an extreme case among human beings, perhaps in another sense his attitude toward life is a natural one, amoral as it is. Annie Dillard has this to say about emotions in nature:

> It is our emotions that are amiss. We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its bank as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first. (1974, p. 178)

Alex may be indifferent all his life, many never wake up to life's feasts and shows. More typically, indifference can come with advancing age, where one might proclaim, like the aging

Solomon, that, "All is vanity and a vexation of spirit." A case is point is the critic Edmund Wilson, someone who partook most bountifully from life's table throughout his long life, but whose memoirs in his later years reflect a great and continual reduction in his circles of meaning.

Initially, his feelings of indifference were transitory: He remarked at age 65:

> At my age, I find that I alternate between spells of fatigue and indifference, when I am almost ready to give up the struggle, and spells of expanding ambition, when I feel that I can do more than ever before. (from Updike, 1994, p. 159)

Eleven years later, the specter of indifference has grown. He says:

> When I look back, I feel quite definitely divided from my earlier self, who cared about things in a way I no longer do. All that comedy and conflict of human activity--one gets to feel cut off from all of that. ...One looks down on an empty arena. What were we all doing there?--running about, jostling and shouting, exchanging vital gossip--involved in great world wars now as trivial and futile as we used to think the Balkan wars were. (from Updike, 1994, pp. 163-164)

So for Wilson, a man of insatiable curiosity and vast appetites, his final emotional state is one of saturnine indifference, and as death approached he could not quite think

why he lived or remember the heavy significance of his efforts. That this is not inevitable in the old is proved in Wilson's own observation of Pope John, who's unceasing efforts as a octogenarian with cancer to modernize the Church he found heartening. Mark Twain was bitter and in a rage as he approached death, Igor Stravinsky continued to compose with positive and vital interest until the end, while Wilson was indifferent, as I have said. One may walk up to death in different ways.

Indifference can be considered to be a collective as well as an individual phenomenon. The anthropologist, Michael Herzfeld (1992) has written an excellent treatment of collective indifference, The social production of indifference: Exploring the symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy. The forms taken by human identity are determined (dramatistically, cf, Sarbin, 1994) by culturally inherited forms, stories, narratives, and roles. In the mid-19th century, modern nationalism and racial ideologies, as well as the growth of the bureaucratic ethic, emerged as a major shapers of identities. The sequel is that the limits of indifference and strong emotional investment are redrawn to correspond to national and racial groupings. The bureaucrat is entitled to restrict caring and to become indifferent in a wholly new and expansive way.

As our stories are shaped, so are our patterns of caring and indifference. This in turn determines the selectivity of our morality--whom and what we strive to save, and whom and what we are content to let perish.

All of the examples cite above are consistent with the proposition that emotional reactivity and the lack of it--indifference--are dependent upon the connections between individuals and their circumstances created by their narrative constructions. The alexithymic individual participates in practically no ongoing stories--circles of meaning are tiny, perhaps as a result of an extreme version of what Ainsworth (1989) described as an "fearful-avoidant" pattern of childrearing, or perhaps, as Kagan (1994) suggests, because of a genetic disposition to extreme apathy. The aging person can be shut out of the possibility of continuing to live a storied life, as the infirmities of the body reduce freedom of movement. The collective indifferences of the nationalist, the racist, the bureaucrat are a direct function of historically conditioned identities.

I have argued that indifference is a natural condition--that none can escape it. But our human capacity to produce and live in a narrative world gives us the capacity to escape from the indifference of the anthill, beehive, or flock. These structures are efficient--much more efficient than our own, where emotional squeamishness keeps us from eating our own dead. But they are unlike the human socius in the crucial respect of not producing our pecular forms of passionate caring.

Psychology is coming to understand that human life cannot be understood at all without the premise that we are as much biographical creatures as we are biological ones. Biography is

story, is narrative, is a construction--and it produces feeling in its train, in exchange for natural indifference. We are obliged to understand this.

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